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Go, and sin no more

A SERMON

PREACHED BEFORE THE

Church Penitentiary Association

AT

ST. JAMES'S CHURCH, PICCADILLY

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BY

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SERMON.

JOHN, viii. 9.

And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.

THE remarkable history before us ought not perhaps to be quoted without drawing attention to some unusual difficulties which surround it; but many of my hearers are aware of them; and I doubt not that the opinion of Augustine gives the true account of them. This narrative is a real portion of the apostolic account of our Lord's life; but a misunderstanding of the passage, a misplaced fear lest it should seem to give encouragement to a great sin, led some to exclude it from the transcripts of the gospels which they made. By degrees the truth and worth of the passage prevailed, under God's blessing, over these groundless scruples, and it was restored to its place. This would account for its absence from some manuscripts, and for the variations where it is inserted. And those who study it carefully will see how strong is the light of divine wisdom in it, will discern in it the odour of the gospel morality, will recognise it as a divine word, and will thank God that it has been preserved to us.

The story is short. A woman taken in sin is brought by some of the Scribes and Pharisees, who were about to accuse her before the Council, to Jesus as to a teacher of the law, for his opinion upon her crime and its punishment. The law against this crime was very severe. But the national practice had become deplorably lax. There is evidence that many of the Rabbins were at this time living in this very sin. The rigour of the law could be no longer enforced, when the guardians of the law were betraying it. The men who brought the woman to the Lord were not acting in the discharge of any duty. They would have professed that their zeal for God was the reason

for their taking on them the office of accusers. They were zealots for God's law, so they thought, as Phinehas the son of Eleazar had been, who executed judgment in a similar case. But they were before One who knew all hearts, and did not mistake for zeal that malicious pleasure at another's downfall, which had pushed them on to be accusers. The question which they proposed, proves that the law and practice were in conflict. "Moses in the law commanded us that such should be stoned; but what sayest thou?" They discreetly suppress the difficulty. They do not say *why* any doubt has arisen about the execution of a plain command. They do not add that adulterous judges could hardly punish adultery with death. If He shall pronounce for her acquittal then He is a declared subverter of the law of Moses. If He shall decide for the exact rigour of the law, then He contradicts the merciful tone of His own preaching, and weakens His influence with the people, to whom He has come as a teacher of mercy and love. Knowing that they sought to tempt Him, not to learn from Him, our Lord acted as one would whom their words did not concern at all; He stooped down and wrote on the ground. For He was not come to dictate to the Council its duties, nor to execute the bitter retribution of the law; but to seek and to save the lost. They knew that the question was not one for Him. If He had said "kill" or "spare," would the judges have obeyed Him? So He wrote on the ground, wrapt not in simulated but in real meditation. But they would not be silenced so; they courted His rebuke by further questions. On which "He lifted up Himself and said unto them, He that is without sin among you," or rather, "He that is without *the* sin among you, let him cast the first stone at her." He neither acquitted nor condemned the woman; he left her to her earthly judges, for His hour for judging the world was not come; but by a few plain words He sent a light into the dark consciences of these hardened men. The punishment of stoning was one for the accusers and witnesses to carry out, that they might show by a terrible act their abhorrence of the sin. When she is sentenced to stoning, which of you shall be the first to show your abhorrence of *this* sin by casting the first stone against her life? Then for the first time did their hypocrisy become patent to themselves, because another saw it. Being convicted by their consciences they went out one by one, from the first to the last, from the well-known member of the Council down to the idle spectator who had found his way thither from curiosity. When the Lord looked up from His meditation a second time, He was alone with the sinful woman. "He said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? Hath

no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go and sin no more." Do not let us suppose that a great sin is here treated lightly; God forbid! The condemnation spoken of is the condemnation under Moses' law. If the accusers withdrew the charge, it was not the Son of Man who would break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax. "Neither do I condemn thee!" It is not mine to punish with temporal punishments, but to snatch from eternal torments. Go and sin no more! Go and use the life, which was forfeit to the law, in repentance and purity. Neither do I condemn thee; for I spare the life of the sinner. Go and sin no more, for the sin is abomination in the sight of God.

It was thus that the Lord Jesus rebuked a great hypocrisy. And if we say that this same hypocrisy prevails amongst us, that it is the chief hindrance to the good work in which you, my friends, are engaged, we shall say what all thoughtful persons are beginning to perceive clearly. Whilst great exertions are being made to snatch from the edge of the pit some of those who are falling into it, we are told by many that there is a peril in success, that the places of those we rescue will be filled by new victims, that so long as the morals of men are what they are, it is vain to expect that women will not perish in sin. And there is a terrible truth in that suggestion. The reformation of the lost in one sex cannot be carried on effectually unless an improvement in the other moves hand in hand with it. Nowhere in this earth will you find greater injustice than that by which the blame for sins of this kind is apportioned between the two sexes. A woman in an evil hour leaves her home and all its peace, to follow the fortunes of one who has won her foolish ear with lying professions. From the moment that the door closes on her flight, a voice in her heart tells her she can never return. But shall she not find with him, for whom she has exchanged all that a woman holds dear, a shelter and protection strong and safe in proportion to the sacrifice she makes to reach them? Vain hope! The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel. After a few short days or weeks, the dream is over. The betrayer goes back to his home, leaving the woman who has darkened her life for him to shame, to debt, to desolation. For one of them life shall be one long punishment; to the other no visible consequences follow upon this episode of sin. He has a wife, of whom his victim never heard, and who perhaps will never hear of his victim. His home remains to him, though he has abused it. His word passes current, though he is steeped in lying. He sits in judgment on the petty pilferer, who has done to death the life's happiness of a woman. He throws himself into his

old amusements, with his old keenness of enjoyment; and she sits apart in the clinging sackcloth of her own dishonour, which changes the very light of day to darkness. Happy is it for her if some Christian voice is raised to comfort her, and to arrest her from plunging further into guilt, and to guide her to One who would not, even for this sin, see her perish, but bids her go and sin no more.

It would be easy to draw a picture of this kind from fancy; but I have confined myself to the bare record of a case known to me. And some of those who hear me will be able to match it with other stories of enormous wrong. We cannot shut our eyes to the fact that two sin, and one bears the whole punishment. Society is ready to cast stones at the guilty one, but the guilt belongs mainly to it, and the stones should fall back upon its own head. Oftentimes it seems to our poor eyes as though God the king of all the earth had forgotten to be just; but nowhere is there a greater trial to our faith than here. Yet let us not doubt that there is a God that judgeth the earth. Death dogs the heels of sin. Not without punishment even here is the man who has played the traitor to another's soul; somewhere in the armour of his selfishness remorse will find a chink, if not now, at least in the hours of sorrow and decline. But what shall be hereafter? "A day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness." (Zeph. i. 15). The way of God is equal; He will not suffer the strong to devour the souls of the weak; He will not suffer one to bear all the weight of the sins of another. He will repay.

We may well be thankful for the direct success that has attended the Christian work of this Association. It has plucked out of utter ruin many souls. It has found them out in moments of remorse, and has turned that remorse through the grace of God into the godly sorrow that worketh repentance unto salvation. It has arrested them before sin had brought forth death; and has placed them where they may eat the bread of industry, and eschew the wages of shame. It has even restored many to those friends whose faces they thought were averted from them for ever. Therein has it trod as closely as any human feet can tread, in the very footsteps of Him who said to the adulteress "Go and sin no more." But it cannot have done this work without having at least begun another, and that not less important. It has recognised the responsibility of society for this hideous evil. Its existence is a standing protest against those who make the wrong which it must undo; against those rather who mar God's workmanship, and leave it to be painfully

restored. For there is this community of interest; if one member suffer, all the members suffer with it. Habits of luxury and expense delay the formation of domestic ties, light words show that the boundaries of purity and sin are not strictly observed. The poor workwoman struggles to be honest on the scanty earnings of her weary fingers; but she sees every day her sinful sister richly dressed, and free from the exactions of labour; and in an evil hour she lays her work aside, and listens to words that make one sinful sister the more. She has fallen; but is the fault hers alone that sin is richly paid, and honest labour scantily? The society we live in is knit together more closely than we will confess. Mark off as sharply as you may the outcasts, they are in some sense your handiwork. Social arrangements have made them the ruin that they are; they will re-act upon society, they will corrupt and destroy its sons and daughters. Truly if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it.

Oh that some one engaged in this holy work would describe plainly but wisely the unseen depths of that abyss into which sin hurries many a thoughtless woman! oh that a man could be taught to see that the present consequences of sin to him are no measure of the present fruits to her who shares in it, nor of the dread results to both hereafter! oh that the Lord would strike conviction into the hearts of many men, as he did into the Scribes and Pharisees who brought the guilty woman before him, and make them feel the share of guilt that belongs to them! Surely if the cruel destruction that it causes were understood, many would shrink back from all share in it. If they could look forward a little, and see one who now is only thoughtless and might still be guided right, utterly broken down by every kind of excess, incapable of any fixed purpose, more frivolous than a child, trying to purchase a momentary relief from depression by poisonous stimulants, they would shrink with horror from the lingering murder of one in whom they feel a kind of interest. It is assumed too often that some sins are too powerful for control. And no doubt from a perfect reformation of this social wrong we are far removed. But men have hearts and feelings. Strip sin of its bright colours, and let it be known that in some way or other the wages of sin are always the same, that it always bringeth forth death, and many a young man who is now entangled in it would struggle for escape. Every miserable outcast, flitting to and fro under the shadows of the night, would be sacred in her sufferings—in the exceeding weight of the retribution she is bearing. It would be thought no light thing to add even one sin to those that already overcloud her life. As the sick and dying are respected even by the hardest, even

so would these sinful and sick and dying ones be safe from affront and from temptation.

Such, then, is your twofold work, my Christian hearers. To say to the sinful woman, Go and sin no more; and to shame her accusers into a conviction of their own share in the sin. In both alike you are working for God. Every new advocate whom you can enlist in your cause should tell those around him that the pleasures of sin are not to be compared with its inextinguishable remorse, its shame, its restless cravings for peace. He should protest against this wicked injustice of the strong sex against the weak. He should remind men that there are sins which the law cannot reach, that yet are abomination in the sight of God. But even short of the guilt of the seducer, society does make itself responsible for some share in this destruction. It pardons the man, while it casts out the woman; it has neglected that Christian teaching of the poor which might have been their shield and buckler against temptation; it sets the example of luxury and idleness which the poor are tempted to imitate. And this Association, and such as it is, offer to society the means of repairing its own wrong-doing. They open out a work of love which every man and woman may put a hand to. Man, in whose conscience arises the thought "For any sin of impurity, I at least could not cast the first stone," think what you can do for restitution for any sin of this kind that may rest at your door. You cannot restore again that defaced image to its former beauty and purity; you could as easily make the dead flower rise up again in its bright hues and fragrance, or put life into the limbs of the dead. But this you can do; you can help efforts that are made to snatch such as she is out of ruin. You can tell other men that the destruction of women rests in fact with them, and that to have taken any part in that foul conspiracy of the strong sex against the weak, is not what will bring a man peace at the last. And be not so ready to take a desponding view of the condition of the fallen. Is not Christ the well of life, out of which fountains of recreative water flow; and cannot He who recalled Lazarus to life, and made the deaf hear and the lame walk, work wonders of renewal in the heart of the repentant? Woman! whose earthly happiness lies in the honour and love of husband, children, friends, do not fail to recollect that of the outcasts of society, who lull the incommunicable pangs of shame to sleep by the treacherous anodyne of drink, and who look with longing, as to a bed of down for the weary, upon the deep water that rushes under the bridge, many a one began life with better promise, perhaps with as fair as yourself. Round her cradle affectionate hopes gathered, and the prayer

of a mother sanctified her sleep; and the first lisping words were shaped into prayers. And as she grew, her very presence was a household blessing; the old man sitting at the hearth would part with all that he possessed to save her from the contact of dishonour. All is gone now; the day that opened so fairly is now the blackness of darkness. Nothing remains but to take the lost sister by the hand, and speak to her the strange words of comfort; to awaken her to the godly sorrow which worketh repentance unto salvation and so issueth in true peace. Our benign Lord has taught us that even the lost may be gathered back; that even when men, too indolent to enquire and discriminate, pronounce the ruin final, the Divine Spirit can rekindle the scattered sparks of love, and warm the cold heart. Let the magistrate or the legislator who knows well that our political institutions consult for the happiness of each citizen, and are so far imperfect as they fail to do so, remember how unequally they deal with this class; how careful they are of human life there, how prodigal here. We have often seen able judges and consummate advocates occupied for days in the trial of one criminal; and we may be proud, that, although the voice of the people may have already pronounced for his guilt, prejudice has been laid aside, and the guilty wretch has received the same dispassionate hearing as if his case was absolutely new. So careful are we lest through prejudice the life of an innocent man should fall! And yet, such is our impotence, that where we see thousands of poor creatures treading the path of certain destruction, we can devise no law to prevent or even palliate the social grievance. The task has been found too difficult by every legislature. But not to offer facilities for the return of those who have found how bitter is the fruit of that whereof the conscience is ashamed, would be a criminal supineness. But God be thanked for it! what the law could not do, the private exertions of the good are beginning to bring about. The pure and refined devote themselves to the care of the lost; they bear with many cases of disappointment; they suffer wayward tempers, and are content with the slow dawnings of good. And they ask for the help of all Christian people, for the prayers of all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. If we have known any consolation in Christ, let us aid in bringing the lost sheep back to their true Shepherd, that instead of the torments of remorse, and the fear of a dreadful future, they may hear the word pronounced by Christ, "Neither do I condemn thee. Go and sin no more."







